# SERIOUS CHOCOLATE

With a global cult following, Toronto-based Soma makes some of the best bean-to-bar offerings on Earth. Owners David Castellan and Cynthia Leung aren't in it for the proceeds, **Chris Nuttall-Smith** writes, but the satisfaction of seeing chocolate reach its full potential

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The Globe and Mail Last updated: Tuesday, Sep. 20, 2016 6:54PM EDT

David Castellan was tasting cocoa beans from his chocolate factory's roaster and he did not like how it was going. Though one of the first beans he pulled from the batch was all bright citrus flavours and ripe red fruit, another one tasted cotton-ball dry; its flavour, if you had to describe it, was essence of Crayola crayon. As the roaster, a hulking, antique clockwork of jerry-rigged gas lines and spinning cast-iron gears, churned and juddered and blasted blue flames, Castellan kept on sampling. He was searching for the first glimmer of chocolate flavour to signal that the batch was done.

The beans were about as big around as almonds in the shell, coloured light brown, but growing darker. This single batch, the contents of two jute sacks weighing a total 120 kilograms, cost Castellan $2,000 (U.S). Sourced from a plantation in the famed northwestern Venezuelan cocoa-producing region called the Ocumare de la Costa, they were a blend of Trinitario and Criollo varieties, the latter a close cousin to the cocoa the Aztecs and Mayans once prized.

Castellan cracked another bean in his palm and brushed away the husk. Its dry, crumbly contents were mottled tan and ivory, with a faint background violet hue. The genetics of any one batch can vary widely, even when sourced, such as this one, from a single origin; each of the papaya-like pods that cocoa beans grow in can contain several different strains. The way the cocoa is handled immediately after harvest can make those differences taste even more pronounced.

This next bean was distinctly sour and funky, like warm, overripe cheese mixed with baby vomit, and not at all in a good way.

“Why do I get a feeling these weren’t fermented properly?” one of Castellan’s assistants said.

Castellan and his wife, an architect named Cynthia Leung, launched Soma Chocolatemaker in 2003 from a tiny retail and production space in Toronto’s Distillery District. While Castellan, who had recently left his job as a high-level pastry chef, took charge of the company’s chocolate-making, Leung developed its retail operations and product design, often dreaming up the next thing for Castellan to create. In those first few years, the couple had to beg for one- and two-bag lots of cocoa beans from brokers more accustomed to supplying tractor-trailer loads to the likes of Nestlé and Mars Inc. There was just one other small-scale bean-to-bar chocolate company in North America at the time: California’s Scharffen Berger, which is now owned by Hershey Co.

The couple’s earliest creations were all but inedible, they admit. Then, as now, Soma’s dark chocolate bars were made from just three ingredients: top-quality cocoa beans, organic cane sugar and a bit of cocoa butter, to help regulate melt and texture. A founding principle at the company held that its chocolate should taste “true to the bean;” Soma’s Madagascar bars would bear Madagascar cacao’s characteristic bright raspberry and citrus high notes over a deep chocolate base, and its Venezuelans would taste strongly reminiscent of cashews and cream. (The company typically avoids cocoa beans from West Africa, where the industry relies heavily on child labour.)

That level of minimalism doesn’t leave much room to hide. The first major review of their work, on an influential chocolate site called C-spot.com, described one Soma bar’s taste as “burnt chocolate [very tannic], heavy tobacco smoke, twigs, nuts, sweaty off-odour,” and its texture as “gummy struggle.”

Yet through trial, error, plenty of expense and a lot of perseverance, the couple helped to pioneer an entire industry. Today, Soma’s bars are cult objects among chocolate aficionados around Europe and North America, and the floor staff at the company’s two Toronto retail stores struggle to keep the most sought-after varieties – there are between 12 and 15 different single-origin dark bars of late, as well as two milk-chocolate offerings – in stock. These days, they’re perennially low on Soma’s 70-per-cent Porcelana, which

tied at the International Chocolate Awards last fall for the best single-origin dark-chocolate bar on Earth.

At $18 for 65 grams, that Porcelana bar is one of their more expensive dark chocolate bars. Given that price, and the constant demand, you might think the couple have struck it rich. But Soma's bean-to-bar chocolate doesn't begin to pay the bills.

## Every batch is an experiment.

Castellan is tall and pale, with floppy brown hair, a quiet voice and a shy smile. If the terms "bean-to-bar" and "craft" put you in mind of some twee gentleman artisan in a worsted three-piece suit and ostrich-leather apron, however, you've got him all wrong. He wears a cotton-poly blend, Dickies-brand work shirt most days. The first time I met him for this story, in January, he had machine oil under his nails.

Castellan and his most trusted chocolate-making staff spend most of their time at manual labour: sorting through bags of cocoa beans for the likes of cigarette butts and plastic flotsam, and tinkering with rickety machines.

The beans become bars in a converted clothing factory in Toronto's west end. Apart from that enormous roaster, which was designed in the 1890s, the facility's bean-processing room, the first stop in the chocolate-making process, contains a vibrating sorting table set on four giant metal springs, a vintage 1960s contraption for finding and removing stones, a commercial steam oven, a homemade hoist for lifting sacks full of beans, a pair of cyclone dust collectors for sucking up airborne cocoa chaff and an SUV-sized antique winnower, for removing the shells from roasted beans, salvaged from a former industrial chocolate factory in Novara, Italy.

That equipment is only background noise when all goes right. The first thing that hits you is the smell of the place. The air here can hang heavy with the scent of nuts and sour cherries, of dark, bitter chocolate, baked ham, bourbon, baby Aspirin, pineapple, raisins, blackstrap molasses and even banana bread, all common flavours in top-grade beans. Yet, every Soma batch is an experiment – this is one of the first rules of chocolate-making at the company. Today, the space smelled mostly of unwashed feet.

Castellan finally pulled a lever to stop the roasting, and 120 kilograms of beans clattered into a hopper near the floor. He leaned over and picked one up, cracked it open and popped it onto his tongue. A couple of seconds later, he'd crossed the room in what looked like a panicked run, and was spitting into a garbage can.

What had he tasted? Crayon? Baby vomit?

"Javex," Castellan said.

## Craft chocolate sticker shock

Here's another rule of craft chocolate-making – one that often surprises people outside the industry. The better the chocolate, the less money you make. "Chocolate has a tendency to make people not think or act rationally," Colin Gasko, the founder of Rogue Chocolatier, in Three Rivers, Mass., said on the phone a few months ago. "People assume that because we're all batshit and have been doing this for a decade that somehow it's been, like, a fun process, and that we've made a bunch of money. And that's not usually the case."

Gasko should know. Rogue's bars, which he first started selling in 2007, are typically lauded by the fine-chocolate world's few respected critics. Gasko's handiwork, which he crafts from the likes of rare, wild cocoa foraged in the Amazon basin, or with beans from tiny Honduran cocoa gene banks, often sells out in prerelease, a little like first-growth Burgundy futures. That award that Soma won last fall for the world's best single-origin dark-chocolate bar? They shared the prize with one of Gasko's creations.

Yet, the chocolate maker, who recently got married and has a toddler, is hardly rolling in the fruits of his renown. When I asked him whether he's able to support his family by making chocolate, he paused for a few seconds, before answering, "No. Ah, no."

"I live with my parents," he said.

Another long pause.

“Yeah. I feel bad because I don’t know what else to say. It just bums people out when they start asking these business questions.”

Though hardly so dire, the situation at Soma is not entirely different. Notwithstanding the time and love that Castellan and Leung pour into their bean-to-bar offerings, most North Americans don’t wander into chocolate stores in search of chocolate. They come for *chocolates*. And so the vast bulk of Soma’s sales, and profits – the capital that the company constantly reinvests in chocolate-making machinery – are derived from Soma’s confectionery lines: its Easter eggs and Valentine’s Day assorted boxes, its butter-caramel pralines and its truffles, its spiced hot-chocolate mixes, moulded chocolate tree branches and custom wedding-favour collections. Unlike the company’s dark chocolate bars, many of those confections contain just a small proportion of Soma-made chocolate, if any at all (it varies seasonally), relying heavily on a custom blend of high-grade European-sourced chocolate, called couverture, instead.

Mark Christian, an influential New York-based writer and critic who runs C-spot, that chocolate website that was so tough on Soma’s early work, calls bean-to-bar chocolate “the poor orphan in the specialty world.”

“You look at it compared to caviar, Champagne, single malt, even the microbrews,” Christian says. “Chocolate’s, come on, six, seven, eight, nine, 10 bucks, and people are getting sticker shock.”

Craft chocolate’s new-found ubiquity is at least partly to blame for that price pressure. In the years since Castellan’s first fumbled experiments, the cottage industry that he and Leung helped found is nearly as common around North America’s major centres as high-end butcher shops. Here in Canada, there are at least 29 bean-to-bar makers, according to Lisabeth Flanagan, a Manitoulin Island chocolatier and chocolate blogger. Vancouver and the B.C. Lower Mainland have four craft chocolate makers by her count. Winnipeg has two, Calgary has one, Toronto has four (with another seven spread throughout Ontario), and there are another four, at least, in Quebec. Almost all of those are less than five years old.

“There’s probably 20 new makers entering the [North American] market in a year,” said Scott Craig, a respected, Texas-based chocolate blogger whose website, Dallasfood.org, is required reading within the industry. “None of them are great and maybe only a couple of them are even halfway decent.”

The bulk of those upstarts make grainy, chewy, off-flavoured, or otherwise mediocre bars from undistinguished cocoa, which they source for as little as $5 to $10 a kilogram, compared with the $50 that the likes of Gasko and Castellan lay out for their best beans. (To be sure, there are notable exceptions: Hummingbird Chocolate Maker, based in Almonte, Ont., near Ottawa, won top prize this summer at the British-based Academy of Chocolate Awards; Palette de Bine, from Mont-Tremblant, Que., also won gold.)

And most of those companies use the relatively cheap, off-the-shelf chocolate machines called CocoaTowns for processing – one-pot cooking, effectively.

“I could start a chocolate company right now,” said Eagranie Yuh, a Vancouver-based pastry chef turned chocolate educator; she runs tasting seminars and is the author of *The Chocolate Tasting Kit*. “I could go order a CocoaTown online and I’d be ready to go. To get a commercial product, it would take me maybe a year. But to get a good commercial product? Five, 10 years for sure.”

Achieving the sort of results that Soma does – chocolate that tastes true to the bean and also unambiguously delicious, with smooth, luxurious texture and a slow, even melt – is with few exceptions far more time – and capital-intensive. Soma’s moulding line alone, which turns tempered chocolate into glossy, blemish-free bars that snap crisply as you bite them, cost €200,000 (almost $300,000), plus the expense of flying in a pair of installers from Turin, Italy.

Worse still, many self-described craft chocolate lovers haven’t learned to distinguish between the great, the mediocre and the abominable: The industry is far too new. “When they’re facing a wall of all these options, man, they’re stupefied,” C-spot’s Christian said.

And so great beans, expensive equipment and the quest for top quality have become competitive disadvantages. Or as Texas blogger Craig put it, “It’s like spending a bunch of time with tweezers, fussing over the presentation of a bowl of dog food for your schnauzer, you know? He’s just going to eat it. He doesn’t care.”

## Does taste really matter, anyway?

In spite of the awards, Soma is still little-known outside the fine-chocolate industry.

Brooklyn, N.Y.-based Mast Brothers, by contrast, hasn’t won any notable chocolate-making awards to speak of, but just about everybody knows who the Mast brothers are.

Rick and Michael Mast began making bars in their Brooklyn apartment in 2007, selling them at flea markets, wrapped in eye-popping designer paper that they sourced in Florence, Italy. The brothers showed an almost limitless capacity for self-promotion and expansion – they were the twee gentleman artisans personified, quickly becoming known for their voluminous red beards. They took on major wholesale customers, published a well-received cookbook (the chef Thomas Keller wrote the foreward), and opened boutique shops in Brooklyn and London, complete with glassed-in production areas, where you could see the banks of CocoaTown machines on display.

Early last year, though, the Mast brothers mythology began to crumble like a shelf-aged drugstore Lindt bar, with an article published in Slate and titled Chocolate Experts Hate Mast Brothers.

The story brought to light some of the long-standing complaints about the Masts’ work: the bars’ laughably shoddy tempering and mealy textures, the off-flavours, the lack of balance. “There are defects in every bar, and the chocolate is bad,” one well-known chocolate expert said. The article noted that nearly every specialty chocolate shop in North America, including Montreal’s La Tablette de Miss Choco, refused to stock the company’s products.

For those who follow the industry, the story bore troubling similarities to that of Noka chocolate, founded at the same time as Soma, coincidentally by another Toronto-area couple. In the mid-2000s, Noka, with the help of an ever-credulous international food press, became the biggest name in so-called luxury chocolate, selling their wares for as much as $2,000 a pound – wares they'd hardly had a hand in making.

The couple had been remelting European couverture and pouring into their own moulds, while letting their customers believe they'd manufactured it from the bean. It took Craig, of Dallasfood.org, to pull that curtain back. Craig's blockbuster report, published on his website in 2006, all but ended Noka's free ride.

Last December, he set his sights on Mast Brothers, with a meticulously reported four-part series accusing the company of chocolate fraud. (Craig, who has an unrelated day job, is fine chocolate's Woodward, and also its Bernstein.)

In the Mast brothers' early years – the period when they took every opportunity to present themselves as path-breaking, brook-no-compromises artisans – the pair snuck remelted couverture into their supposedly artisanal, scratch-made product line, Craig alleged. The evidence he marshalled didn't leave much room for doubt.

"Rick and Michael Mast were the Milli Vanilli of chocolate," he wrote.

The brothers can console themselves with the stacks of money that stream into their company unabated. "I don't think the Masts have suffered at all because of the scandal," said Yuh, the chocolate educator.

"It's just a speed bump," C-spot's Christian said. This past spring, the company opened a 6,000-square-foot factory and retail space in downtown Los Angeles.

"The Mast brothers are it! Nobody's even in their rear-view when it comes to making the dime," Christian said.

Their secret? Mast is the anti-Soma.

“They get it: It ain’t about the chocolate, man,” Christian said. “You can hang a chocolate shingle anywhere and consumers will react. In some ways taste doesn’t matter. That’s what the Mast brothers figured out: Taste doesn’t matter to the business bottom line.”

## Profits vs. purity: Soma’s next big play

The morning after that disastrous roasting session – the one with the Javex-flavoured taste test – Castellan and Chris Janosi, an assistant chocolate maker, poured the beans into plastic construction pails and lugged them into Soma’s refining space. The equipment here, humming away along one wall, looked a good century or two more advanced than in the factory’s roasting room.

Castellan’s first job that morning was to grind the beans into cocoa liquor: the bitter, shelf-stable sludge that’s the foundation of any good chocolate. It would be his first chance to get a proper taste of how the batch had done.

Chocolate-making is often compared to wine-making, because ideally the best examples from both disciplines are faithful expressions of a single agricultural product. Yet, while vintners can walk out their winery doors to tend and harvest their own grapes, Castellan doesn’t have that opportunity. Cocoa grows only in a narrow tropical band around the equator, and there’s no cost-effective way to ship it fresh in its heavy pods. “You have to rely on sources that are very far away,” he said.

By the time the beans get to Soma’s factory, they’ve been scooped from their pods, fermented in wooden vats and then left to dry in the sun, most typically. Those first, faraway steps – the harvest, ferment and drying – largely dictate how the chocolate will taste. But with the right equipment and a bit of patience, a skilled chocolate maker can manage a trick or two.

As the cocoa liquor slumped from the grinder’s spigot into a stainless steel pan, Castellan passed a spoon through the stream. The texture was chalky and astringent, and the taste acidic. I got that sour cheese flavour, mostly, the same one we smelled and tasted during roasting, but with an obvious deep-chocolate undercurrent. And there

were now other, unexpected notes. “There is that sort of old ashtray taste at the end that I’m not sure about,” Castellan said.

Still, he was optimistic. Allowed to sit overnight and ground into a single mass, those beans had become at least slightly less godawful. He might even be able to smooth away most of the rough edges with the factory’s conche, a machine that gently heats and aerates, allowing volatile acids and off-flavours to blow away. Either way, it’s not like the company was desperate for another batch. Along the wall opposite those machines, the floor-to-ceiling shelves were stacked with Castellan’s efforts: plastic-wrapped, 20-pound slabs of cocoa liquor, 120 of them, at least, from a dozen different origins. Another room, adjacent to the company’s bar-moulding line, was crammed with plastic-wrapped chocolate bricks and buckets of chocolate pieces. All told, the company had enough on hand this summer to get through months of low-season demand.

Demand, though, is a nebulous concept around Soma’s factory, as are such hard-nosed business principles as profit, loss, shrinkage and margin. The company’s bean-to-bar line has always been a passion project, mostly, and not a profit centre. And in any case, Leung and Castellan are as unlike your average world-beating business people as I’ve ever met.

Soma has never hired a publicist or issued a single press release. (“I don’t even know how,” Leung said. “Like, who do you write that to? I have no idea.”) Until recently, their company had never taken a single bank loan; they perpetually save and reinvest Soma’s revenue instead. The couple routinely declines inquiries from would-be distributors who might take the Soma brand international. They have no interest in pursuing, or accepting, large retail accounts. “We’ve just been quietly doing our own thing,” Leung said one day late this winter.

Another time, she told me, “We’re so small that we can go from sitting in bed, coming up with something new, and then getting it out within three weeks. If we were big, how would we do that?”

Given the acclaim they’ve earned, many of their goals seem damnably small.

But they do have one big play in the works – one that in the next six to 12 months should triple the amount of from-the-bean chocolate Soma makes.

Last fall, Leung and Castellan bought a 10,000-square-foot industrial building in Toronto's Brockton Village neighbourhood, near Bloor and Dufferin Streets. They plan to rent out half, and are converting the other half into the company's main factory as well as a retail and educational space. Leung designed the facility so the public can wander through to see the entire chocolate-making process from behind glass partitions. And the couple are overbuilding everything: storage, capacity, even the electrical circuits.

"Whatever we think we need right now, we're tripling or quadrupling it," Leung said.

Are they going the way of Mast Brothers, aiming at long last for world chocolate domination? Not exactly, as it turns out.

When they move into that space, Castellan and Leung plan to take their company backward, to correct a reality that's been bugging them for 13 years.

They plan to replace the European couverture Soma uses in its confectionery lines with chocolate that Soma makes itself, from the bean. In low season, they're already there, but though the peak Christmas-through-Easter period, the company still has a long way to go.

Doing so would put them in extremely rarefied company; as a rule, chocolatiers in North America, no matter how renowned, buy their main ingredient. The project will also eat sharply into Soma's margins. The European chocolate giants make good, consistent couverture far more cheaply than Soma can.

And the switch will force Castellan to radically revise his approach to much of the company's chocolate-making.

"Up until now the focus was on these 70-per-cent batches that were totally experimental, and we could mess around with roasts and tweak this and that. And if it

came out great, it was amazing," he said. "But the real work is making a consistent batch of chocolate every time. That's more an industrial focus and it's a little odd for us."

As for the payoff, it's going to be karmic, mostly; it's doubtful that most of Soma's confectionery customers will ever know or care where the chocolate in their almond toffee clusters comes from.

"Well, we're chocolate makers, right?" Castellan said when I asked why they'd bother. "That's the most interesting part of what we do. I don't know that people will appreciate it that much, but it will feel good to us."

## Melt-in-your-mouth science

My last time at Soma's factory, Leung and Castellan were sampling a few of their own most recent experiments, including a new, single-origin milk bar that tasted richly of dulce de leche, and for Soma's confections, a raspberry-and-cocoa-butter concoction that was simultaneously so voluptuously creamy and so fresh-tasting that I could have eaten it by the pound.

Leung set a bar called Black Science Ocumare on the table and snapped it into pieces. "The Javex beans," Castellan said.

Those off-flavours, the bleach, the stinky cheese, the baby vomit and the wax crayon, had receded so they were just a faraway whisper, and a deep, reverberating chocolate base remained, with top notes of pepper, tobacco, well-steeped tea and back-of-throat spice.

Castellan didn't seem to love it, and as he and I were talking, I overheard Janosi, the assistant chocolate maker, say it was harsher-tasting than he'd like.

He had a point. It didn't have the easy fruit-forwardness of a Madagascar, the bananas and bourbon accent of Soma's Jamaica, or the cashews and cream complexity of the Porcelana. It was, however, an excellent representation of the beans they'd used. And above all else, the chocolate was delicious.

The flavours shifted and evolved as the pieces melted: tightly knit fats and sugars, fruity acids and esthers, complex phenols, dienals, cannabinoids and a few hundred other supervolatile molecules, all bound in a single, irresistibly tasty substance that started life in a pod on a tree in a cocoa forest halfway around the globe.

“It’s super-interesting,” I told Castellan, my mouth full.

“I’m proud of it,” he answered. “That’s the journey, man.”